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ABSTRACT

The author reports a recent study on humorous and non-humorous speeches on two topics: the meaning of totalitarianism and an explanation of the Whorf hypothesis. Student subjects listened to two recorded speeches--the humorous version of one speech and the non-humorous version of the other speech--and later responded to a multiple-choice test of information retention. For the speech on totalitarianism, there was no significant difference in retention between those who had heard the two versions. For the speech on the Whorf hypothesis, however, results showed that those who heard the non-humorous version learned significantly more than those who heard the humorous one. The author concludes that a speaker should be cautious about the inclusion of humor, suggesting that one who relies on humor may, in fact, impart less information than if he were to deliver the same speech without humor. (Author/RN)

The Relationship Between Humor and Retention

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Introduction

The suggestion that humor is an effective aid in communicating information, ideas, and feelings to an audience has been current in the field of speech for years; however, to paraphrase Mark Twain's quip about the weather: Many theorists and scholars have talked about its effectiveness, but few have acted to test their hypotheses. The few studies that have been conducted offer little encouragement in support of the theoreticians' advice.

The element of humor in communication has been studied in several disciplines including Sociology, Psychology, and Speech. The amount of inquiry notwithstanding, Flugel notes that the theoretical and experimental literature of humor "has done little towards explaining the ultimate nature of the phenomena concerned."[1] He concludes, moreover, that most modern psychological theories of humor explain it as being an adaptive adjustment mechanism.

Taylor investigated the effectiveness of humor in informative speeches.[2] He used two speeches, identical except that one contained humor while the other did not. The speech concerned the long-range influence of the ideas of the eighteenth century clergyman and political economist Thomas Malthus.

Using a pretest, immediate posttest, and one week delayed posttest, Taylor discovered that both recall and retention did take place; however, there was no statistically significant difference between the humorous and non-humorous versions of the speech. Because no test was made to determine whether the subjects actually perceived the humorous speech as humorous, the conclusions from this particular study are dubious.

Gruner investigated the effects of humor both on perceptions of a speaker's ethos and the audience's information gain.[3] He concluded that the presence of humor provided neither greater nor lesser information gain than did the speech void of humor.

Kennedy inquired into the effect of humorous message content and retention.[4] In this study he explored the question "Will a humorous speech significantly increase the retention of information?" Little evidence was found in this study to support the advice of those who advocate extensive use of humor in oral communication.

Aided by volunteer subjects from a number of Detroit Institute of Technology classes, Kilpela discovered that the inclusion of humorous material in persuasive speeches did not cause audience attitudes to shift any more than a serious speech.[5] He also supported the conclusions of Taylor and Gruner in finding that the use of humor in informative discourse did not result in greater retention than did non-

humorous speeches as measured by recall tests over the speech material.

Gibb found that a humorous biology lecture did significantly increase retention, when compared to a non-humorous lecture.[6] In this study the pre-test retention scores were taken from the University of Utah Placement Test in biology which was administered in the Spring and Summer of 1963 to incoming freshmen. The post-test was given in the Winter of 1964. During this intervening period of time, the subjects may not only have increased their knowledge in biology, but also become more accustomed to taking college examinations. Therefore, the gain in learning may not have been a function of humor.

As can be seen from this brief summary of previous studies, additional research is needed to explore more fully the relationship between humor and retention.

Purpose and Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine what effects, if any, the inclusion of listener-defined supportive humor in informative speeches has on an audience's retention of content.

Listener-defined supportive humor is here defined as humor that has been perceived, by groups of listeners similar to the subjects in the actual experiment, as being humorous. The humor in the investigation was designed for specific functions rather than merely inserted for its own sake. Numerous specific functions of humor may be postulated in speaking. Some of the most common ones are to support the speaker's

ethos, emphasize points in the speech to be learned or remembered and augment total effect of learning and/or liking the speech. The present study included humor designed to serve in each of these functions. The dependent variable was the amount of information retained.

The research question investigated by the study was:

> What is the relationship between the presence-absence of humor in a speech of information and the amount of information learned from the speech?

Although the majority of previous studies concerning the effects of humor in informative discourse seem to indicate that humor is of little importance, the present study still appeared to be justified for at least two reasons. First, much of the previous research examined the effects of humor that was essentially purposeless or non-functional. One might even argue that humor which serves no function, in reality, is even dysfunctional. Second, previous research has focused on direct effects of humor when conceivably its relationship to particular communication outcomes is indirect. This study was, in part, predicated on such an assumption. That is, in a speech situation involving essentially unmotivated listeners (unmotivated in the sense that they are captive rather than people seeking out information), the use of humor by an unknown or little known speaker can build that individual's

ethical appeal. Audience members, in turn, would become more attentive to the content of a message by a speaker possessing more ethical appeal than by one who lacked such appeals.

Preliminary Research

Previous research of the relationship between humor and speaking effectiveness offered no rationale regarding how speeches used in studies were selected. Nor was there any indication as to how interested the subjects were in the topics or the amount of knowledge they possessed regarding these topics. In the present study, topics of interest to the subjects were desired in order that topic salience be assured.

Ninety-six subjects, similar to those used in the experiment, were asked to rate forty-eight speech topics on a one-to-seven step scale which was designed to measure their probable interest in the topics. From the ratings, two topics were selected from category three, "I would like to hear a speech on this topic." Selections were made from this category to assure that the subjects had an interest in the content area to be covered. Also, topics of moderate interest were selected to minimize the possibility that the subjects would have strong preconceived biases regarding the topics. This could be true for speeches that were rated

at either extreme. Topics so rated might be those which the subjects would either reject automatically or would listen to merely to reinforce their beliefs. Thus, information gain would be minimal.

From these ratings the speech topics, (1) What is Totalitarianism? and (2) An Explanation of the Whorf Hypothesis were selected. The former speech was adapted from one by Lauralee Peters[7]; the latter was original.

Supportive humor was defined as that which augmented the point occurring either before or after its usage. The humor appeared equally often before and after the points to be tested.

The humorous inserts for each speech were pretested on groups of thirty subjects each, similar to those used in the actual experiment. The humorous items were listed in context and the subjects reacted to how humorous they felt each item was by rating in on a one-to-fifteen point scale, where one indicated very unhumorous and fifteen indicated very humorous. For the totalitarianism speech the average ratings ran from a low of 8.4 to a high of 12.9, those for the Whorf speech, from 8.5 to 10.5. These results indicated that the material was considered humorous by people other than the experimenter, and thus qualified as listener-defined humor.

The two speeches were recorded by different speakers, both graduate students in the Department of Speech and Theatre at Indiana University. Two speakers were used to minimize speaker effects with each speaker recording the humorous version of one speech. Copies of each speech were then made and edited in such a fashion that the humorous materials were deleted. This gave four speeches: a humorous and non-humorous version of both the totalitarianism and the Whorf topics. The two versions of the same topic were identical except that one contained listener-defined humor and one did not.

Multiple choice examinations were constructed, following the recommendations of Thorndike and Hagen, in which a question was asked concerning each point where humor was used.[8] These were administrated to two groups of fifty-six and fifty-seven subjects for the totalitarianism and the Whorf speeches respectively. The percentages of correct responses to the questions for the two speeches in this preliminary study ran from 49 percent to 87 percent. Each test had a total of twenty-one single answer five-point multiple choice questions.

Following the preparation of the test materials pilot studies were conducted. In these studies the scores on the dependent variable for the humorous and non-humorous versions of each speech pair ~~was~~ were compared. For the totalitarianism speech there was no statistically significant difference in

retention between those subjects who heard the two versions; for the Whorf speech, those subjects hearing the non-humorous version of the speech learned significantly more.

Procedure

The subjects used in the study were students from randomly selected sections of Speech S-121, the basic speech course at Indiana University. These students represent a general cross-section of university undergraduates. The sections selected were randomly assigned to treatments.

Each section heard two tape recorded speeches; the humorous version of one speech and the non-humorous version of the other speech. To evaluate the differences in information gain between subjects who heard the humorous and those who heard the non-humorous versions of both the totalitarianism and the Whorf speeches, simple analyses of variance were computed.

Results

Table 1 presents analyses of variance results on the comparison of learning effects for subjects hearing the humorous and non-humorous versions of the totalitarianism and Whorf speeches in the major part of the investigation.

The analyses reported above were based on the subjects' responses to the twenty-one question learning examinations made for each speech. An analysis of the comparison of means between the subjects hearing the humorous and non-humorous versions of the totalitarianism speeches indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p = .77$). However, the analysis of those hearing the two versions of the Whorf speech indicates that there was a difference ($p < .0001$) and that the subjects hearing the non-humorous version learned significantly more than those who listened to the humorous version, a finding consistent with the results of the preliminary research.

Discussion

Previous research by Gruner[9], Lull[10], Kennedy[11], Kilpela[12], and Taylor[13] indicated the use of humor does not increase the amount of knowledge that subjects learn from a speech. One study by Gibb, however, indicated that subjects were able to learn more from a humorous biology lecture than from a non-humorous one.[14]

Results from the present study, for the totalitarianism speech, add support to the conclusions drawn from the majority of the previous investigations. However, for the Whorf speech, subjects who heard the non-humorous version learned significantly more than those listening to the humorous version.

A possible explanation for the inconsistency may rest with the subjects' reactions to the topics themselves. The topic of Totalitarianism is one about which most of the subjects, college undergraduates, have both an interest and some knowledge, however superficial. The second topic, the Whorf hypothesis, is one about which the majority had little or no previous knowledge.

It is plausible that the subjects used this knowledge and interest concerning totalitarianism, in addition to the information presented in the speech, to answer questions asked on the learning examination. The mean correct responses for the subjects hearing the humorous and non-humorous versions of the totalitarianism speech were 10.61 and 10.45 respectively; the variances were 9.06 and 6.86. For the same versions of the speech on the Whorf hypothesis the means were 7.16 and 9.88; the variances were 5.11 and 5.02. It is also possible, of course, that the test for the former topic was easier.

Comments voluntarily offered by subjects at the end of testing periods offer further credence to this possibility. Several subjects indicated that the concepts presented in the Whorf speech, although interesting, were completely novel to them. Typical comments the subjects made were, "I've never heard of this before. Are these ideas widely accepted?" and "Where can I find more information on this subject?"

Comments from subjects concerning the totalitarianism

speech demonstrated that they did have some previous knowledge. Typical among these comments are the following, "I wish the speaker had given us some new information," and "Why do they always use the same examples when talking about totalitarianism. I should think he would have taken examples from the present United States Government."

Another possible explanation for the obtained results may be that the humor-topic interaction is a function of incongruity. Totalitarianism is not a topic one ordinarily, if ever, hears treated in a humorous manner. As a result, humor in the experimental version of the speech may have functioned disruptively by drawing attention away from the critical points; whereas, in other situations in which the use of humor and speech topics are congruous (or at least not incongruous), the use of humor would aid the listener in focusing on critical points and thereby increase the amount of information learned.

Also, the amount of humor used in a speech may have an influence on the amount of information learned. That is, too much humor, even if supportive, will become the focus of a listener's attention and cause him to lose sight of points which the humor is intended to emphasize. This suggests that learning as a result of amount of humor may be an inverted u-shaped function.

Subjects' responses to the items testing learning for the first half of the humorous version of the Whorf

speech were compared with their responses to questions asked about the last half of the speech. The mean number of correct responses for the first half was 3.04; for the last half 3.78. This could indicate that the subjects initially intrigued by the humor per se and, as a result, were not attending to the ideas in the first part of the speech. The impact of the supportive humor may, therefore, have been a function of its position in the speech.

Another possibility that might explain the obtained results is that while a repeated measures design was used to reduce error variance in the dependent variable, it may have unintentionally created a different sort of problem. Since both groups heard the humorless speech second, it is possible that a recency effect was operating. The listeners simply had better recognition for the more recent items. There may, of course, be additional explanations.

Conclusion

From the results obtained in this investigation one may conclude that a speaker who plans on presenting an informative speech should exercise great caution in following the advice of those rhetorical theoreticians who recommend the inclusion of humor. The present study, in contrast to

some of those conducted previously, suggests that a speaker who relies upon humor as a mode of communicating ideas to an audience, may impart less information than he would if he were to deliver the same speech devoid of humor.

TABLE 1

ANALYSES OF VARIANCE OF MEAN LEARNING SCORES
(MAJOR RESEARCH)

Source	df	SS	MS	F	P
(a) Totalitarianism Speeches			(n= 51 humorous, 51 non-humorous)		
Groups	1	.62	.62	.07	.77
Error	100	794.78	7.94		
Total	101	795.40			
(b) Whorf Speeches			(n = 51 humorous, 51 non-humorous)		
Groups	1	189.42	189.42	37.43	.00
Error	100	506.04	5.06		
Total	101	695.46			

Footnotes

1. J. C. Flugel, "Humor and Laughter," in Handbook of Social Psychology, ed. by Gardner Lindzey, II (Cambridge: Addison-Wesley, 1954), p. 709.

2. Pat M. Taylor, "The Effectiveness of Humor in Informative Speeches," Central States Speech Journal, XV (1964), 295-296.

3. Charles R. Gruner, "An Experimental Study of Satire as Persuasion," Speech Monographs, XXXII (1965), 184-185.

4. Allan Kennedy, "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Humorous Message Content Upon Ethos and Persuasiveness" (paper presented at the 1970 convention of the Speech Communication Association in New Orleans, Louisiana, December 28, 1970).

5. Donald E. Kilpela, "An Experimental Study of the Effects of Humor on Persuasion" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Wayne State University, 1961).

6. John Doublas Gibb, "An Experimental Comparison of the Humorous Lecture and the Non-Humorous Lecture in Informative Speaking" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Utah, 1964).

7. Lauralee Peters, "What is Totalitarianism?" in Contemporary American Speeches: A Sourcebook of Speech Forms and Principles, ed. by Wil A. Linkugle, R. R. Allen, and Richard L. Johannsen (2nd ed.; Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), pp. 50 - 54.

8. Robert L. Thorndike and Elizabeth Haden, Measurement and Evaluation in Psychology and Education (2nd ed.; New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1969), pp. 71-78.

9. Gruner, "Satire as Persuasion," pp. 184-185.

10. P. E. Lull, "The Effectiveness of Humor in Persuasive Speeches," Speech Monographs, VII (1940), 26-27.

11. Kennedy, "Effect of Humorous Message Content Upon Ethos and Persuasiveness."

12. Kilpela, "Effects of Humor on Persuasion."

13. Taylor, "Humor in Informative Speeches," pp. 295-296.

14. Gibb, "Humorous vs. Non-Humorous Lecture."